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Revitalization of the work of the General Assembly

Letter dated 9 June 2003 from the Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the United Nations addressed to the President of the General Assembly

I have the honour to forward herewith the report of a retreat on reform of the General Assembly, which brought together a group of Permanent Representatives on 16 and 17 May 2003 (see annex). The meeting was organized by the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and the International Peace Academy, in close cooperation.

Participants in the seminar discussed the role of and priority issues for the General Assembly, the streamlining of its agenda, its decision-making processes and the organization of its work.

Participants discussed concrete suggestions for possible improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of the General Assembly and agreed that these could be useful contributions to the ongoing discussions on its revitalization.

I would be grateful if you would have the present letter and its annex circulated as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 53.

(*Signed*) Dirk Jan **van den Berg**
Permanent Representative of the
Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations

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Annex to the letter dated 9 June 2003 from the Permanent Representative of the Netherlands to the United Nations addressed to the President of the General Assembly

From promise to practice: revitalizing the General Assembly for the new millennium

High-level retreat, 16-17 May 2003
Greentree Estate, Manhasset, New York

Summary and programme of action

Introduction

The International Peace Academy, in collaboration with and thanks to generous support from the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, convened a high-level retreat on 16 and 17 May entitled "*From promise to practice: revitalizing the General Assembly for the new millennium*". The retreat brought together, in an informal setting, approximately 25 Permanent Representatives and a very few Deputy Permanent Representatives, in addition to a member of the Secretariat and a key outside expert, over dinner and one full day of deliberations at the Greentree Estate in Manhasset, New York.[a]

The purpose of the retreat was to provide an opportunity for open and frank discussion on intergovernmental revitalization and, possibly, reform with a focus on the premier deliberative body of the United Nations system: the General Assembly. The ultimate goal of the retreat was to generate concrete suggestions for improvement or resolution in order to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of the Assembly.

Opportunities: the unique role of the General Assembly

The essence of the General Assembly lies in its unique role in bringing together all the countries of the world on an equal footing. By providing a forum for deliberation among member States, it offers the opportunity to engage in cooperation at a global level and on an unusually broad spectrum of issues. It should be appreciated that for many countries the Assembly is their main outlet on the international stage. As such, the Assembly embodies and gives voice to the core principles of the Charter of the United Nations. As a meeting place and a forum in which to discuss global issues, the General Assembly is unparalleled.

The primary success of the General Assembly has been in the creation and maintenance of international norms. The special sessions and major conferences that the Assembly has convened have substantially contributed to this success. It has been the birthplace of important international treaties and agreements and has therefore played an essential role in developing international law.

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[a] We are also grateful to the Greentree Foundation for its generous support for this event.

In this regard, declaratory resolutions of the General Assembly have had an impact. For instance, the Assembly played a unique role in bringing an end to the apartheid regime in South Africa, and further in solidifying the principle of equality among peoples around the world.

Challenges: the General Assembly in a complex, unipolar world

The General Assembly faces two primary challenges that threaten its — and the United Nations — credibility and legitimacy as global arbiter and decision maker. The first, policy-level, challenge is the chronic, and increasingly acute, gap between issues of global import and relevance and the way they are addressed by the Assembly. Since the early 1990s it has been increasingly hamstrung by the inability of member States to situate the Assembly in the post-cold-war era.

The second challenge is primarily operational, and lies in its rigid and mechanical procedures, which are the result of traditions and habits rather than of Charter provisions or of considerations focused on goals to be achieved. The General Assembly's lack of teeth to ensure the implementation of decisions also contributes to the perception of irrelevance.

These challenges are in part why attention and decision-making have shifted to the Security Council, sometimes even for matters that are only indirectly connected to its responsibilities. At the same time, other bodies, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, have gained significant ground in economic and social spheres. The effectiveness of these financial institutions has been buttressed by significant resources, but also by their orientation towards monitoring and results, and perhaps by their non-consensual mode of operation. The emergence of increased regional cooperation has also distanced the General Assembly in the perspectives of member States.

Key issues and key actions

A. Political will — "attitude"

Real or perceived national interests dominate much of the debate (sometimes understandably so), but divert attention away from the overarching interest of member States to keep the work in the General Assembly relevant and responsive to world events and global developments. Our present actions in the Assembly in fact run the risk of being evaluated by later generations as the proverbial rearranging of the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. This necessitates that all member States, small, big and very big, share the view that the relevance of the Assembly in essence coincides with their national interests. In order to overcome the current "autopilot" behavioural patterns of member States in the Assembly — and the comfort that irrelevance sometimes seems to bring — creative thinking is required on how to shape the work of the Assembly. The spirit that animated the Millennium Summit clearly needs to be rekindled if we want to promote the results called for by the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals.

Is there a genuine political will to revitalize or to reform the General Assembly? A clear focus on this issue still seems to be obscured by the persistence of the North-South dichotomy in the New York United Nations arena, which, while

important, also seems to have slowed progress as a result of the general and unhelpful "them and us" approach that can accompany it. Admittedly, North-South and other regional groupings have developed as important negotiation mechanisms, in part to overcome the asymmetries of power inherent in the international system. However, while North-South groupings may have been useful, their utility in achieving positive negotiated outcomes has declined since the end of the cold war. Groups also obscure the differences of view and of interest among their members.

B. Leadership

Leadership: role of the President

Achieving results requires effective leadership. Unfortunately, the General Assembly is by its very nature antithetical to leadership; more, member States, at times, resist it. Nonetheless, participants agreed that the role of the President of the General Assembly was crucial and necessary in providing overall leadership to the body. The ability of the President to provide leadership was deemed to be a function of various factors, including past experience in, and good knowledge of, the United Nations system; his/her continued presence in New York; the availability of resources and high-quality support staff; and good communication and leadership skills. History suggests that it has not always been an easy task to find individuals that combine all the necessary qualities.

The lack of resources available to the General Assembly, and in particular to the President and his/her cabinet, in terms of both money and personnel, significantly hampers the effectiveness of the body. The President brings to bear those resources he/she is able to garner (inherently favouring resource-rich delegations). In addition, the lack of continuity of staff between presidencies discourages lesson-learning and the development of institutional memory.

- It was suggested that candidates for the presidency of the Assembly should be elected on the basis of a good match between personal capacities (including management skills), experience and functional requirements; geographical considerations should come second. Election from a group of several candidates could be desirable.

- Consideration could also be given to electing an effective President for a second (or third) term in a row. (Although fixing the term of a President for one year, the Charter does not preclude re-election.) A second term would enable the President to draw upon experience and to project continuity. In addition, consideration could be given to advancing the election of a President so as to allow a good amount of time for the preparation of his or her term of office.

- A third suggestion concerned the introduction of a General Assembly coordinator to support the President. Under the direct guidance of the President, this individual would be responsible for taking care of the direct management of Assembly meetings, provide for procedural solutions for specific agenda items (if required) and keep track of "work in progress" regarding resolutions, etc. The President could concentrate on key decisions to be taken by the Assembly, possible high-level events, the procedural tasks incumbent on the President, etc. Such a coordinator could be recruited from among (experienced) Permanent Representatives.

- A fourth suggestion focused on the need to staff and budget more seriously the Office of the President. United Nations staff members should be encouraged to enrich their working experience by serving two or three years in the Office of the President. Such arrangements could also help to increase the level of institutional memory in the Office.

Leadership: role of the Secretary-General

The role of the Secretary-General in providing intellectual and moral leadership should be put to better use to guide more actively the General Assembly in its deliberations. Although in formal terms the President of the Assembly ranks higher than the Secretary-General, reality dictates that the Secretary-General is in the present circumstances better placed to provide this kind of leadership.

- It was therefore suggested that the Secretary-General should issue his report on the work of the Organization well in advance of the start of the General Assembly session and the general debate. The Secretary-General could include a section on one or two key global issues, which could serve as a point of reference for the general debate. In fact, these suggestions can already be found in resolution 51/241.

Leadership: role of Permanent Representatives

The corps of 191 Permanent Representatives constitutes a rich reservoir of experience and intellect. However, too often this "capital" is underexploited. Reality dictates that one individual can hardly fully master the vast range of topics covered by the United Nations. There is a serious risk that Permanent Representatives can turn into observers of the processes for which they themselves are responsible; it is like seeing the ship being wrecked while in command of the steering wheel. This phenomenon is amplified by the bias of attention in favour of the political agenda at the United Nations and within Missions. Permanent Representatives should regain control of the complete agenda of the United Nations, secure its coherence and focus on its outcome. The effective leadership of Permanent Representatives is vital in this regard.

- Permanent Representatives could be more involved in the Assembly through better use of their possible roles as facilitators or vice-presidents. The President of the Assembly could ask one or several Permanent Representatives to deal with a certain issue as facilitator(s). Depending on the issue, the selection could be made on the basis of a regional distribution or on the basis of specific knowledge and experience. Such a group should be clearly announced and operate in a transparent manner.

C. The agenda of the General Assembly

The general debate

The opening meetings of each session of the General Assembly offer a unique opportunity to provide intellectual focus at the highest levels, in capitals and within the United Nations system, around major themes of global relevance. Over the years the debate has attracted the presence of a substantial number of Heads of State or Government, as well as Foreign Ministers. These meetings are also important in that they provide a unique window into the United Nations system for capitals and the

general public, thanks to fleeting media interest during that period. The general debate is also of major value because of the occasion it provides to engage in useful diplomatic work in the "corridors" of the Assembly.

Nevertheless, it seems that the general debate has lost relevance in its formal plenary format. Speeches lack common focus on important international issues and clearly have a significant domestic dimension. The introduction of key themes could help to redress this. The Secretary-General's millennium report was crucial in this respect: it offered member States the opportunity to reflect on the major priorities outlined by the Secretary-General and was instrumental in making a success of that year's General Assembly session.

- The notion of "key themes" for General Assembly sessions should be repeated in the future to provide greater coherence to the articulation of priorities by member States and to the Assembly as a whole. This underlines the importance of a more focused annual report of the Secretary-General on the work of the organization.
- The function as a meeting place could be made more explicit and relevant by inviting key persons of other international institutions of importance for the discussions on the key themes.
- The infrastructure of the general debate (the "corridors") as a meeting place needs improvement. Not only the physical infrastructure (the improvised cubicles) but also the communication structure could be improved.

The agenda

Perhaps the most important issue on which action by the membership can be taken immediately is to revive the role of the General Assembly as the political body in which major issues of the day are discussed. However, to maximize the utility of the body member States must be willing to engage in actual deliberation and debate rather than the mechanistic and non-interactive policy-statement approach that currently characterizes the discussions therein.

- In this respect the Assembly should be able to respond in a flexible manner to the desires of member States to take up topical issues that are of truly global importance: e.g., the role of multilateralism, conflict management, terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, poverty, etc.
- In this context, high-level dialogues, and especially panels, were mentioned as a format to accommodate discussion on topical issues. They should not be free-floating add-ons, but should be linked to the decision-making process and partially replace the traditional "debates".
- While continuing its norm-setting role, the Assembly should also concentrate much more on implementation of the results of the major conferences and other agreements of the past decade. Implementation will be vital for the United Nations now that the comprehensive global agenda has been set and its objectives translated in the Millennium Declaration and the Millennium Development Goals.

With 173 agenda items proposed for the fifty-eighth session, the General Assembly's agenda is clearly unwieldy. As a result, it lacks coherence, especially as seen from the outside world. But also for many Missions, and in particular the

smaller ones, the agenda is increasingly difficult to comprehend. In order to render it more relevant and accessible, and more meaningful to delegation's capitals, it must be streamlined. This requires member States to identify issues of primary relevance to be placed at the top of the agenda. In addition, there is a need to re-examine how the agenda is actually addressed.

- It was suggested that issues on the agenda be re-clustered around major themes, e.g., in alignment with the seven sections of the Millennium Declaration. This could clarify the link between the Millennium Declaration and the agenda.
- It was suggested that the agenda be seen as a comprehensive list of issues. The programme of work of a specific session of the Assembly should then be based on the agenda but not necessarily encompass all the issues on it. In this way member States could focus on issues that are considered to be of particular importance to that session of the Assembly.
- The agenda should be drawn up on the basis of an issue-driven format. The listing of resolutions as agenda items does not improve the understanding of the main orientations of the Assembly. The annotation of the agenda could perhaps be envisaged in order to make it more informative. Such annotations could be elaborated to include a description of key issues to be addressed and of the decisions that are expected of the member States under the particular agenda item. This could steer the Assembly away from the compulsory reflex that every agenda item should end in a resolution.
- A group of experts could shed light on the agenda and list proposals to enhance its transparency and management. This group of experts could consist of former Permanent Representatives, former members of the Secretariat or outside experts (academics, consultants). Whether this would be a one-time or a regular exercise remains to be seen. Such a study could certainly be a point of departure for the other suggestions in this section. It was suggested that such a group could convene at very short notice to submit proposals as a "gift" to the incoming President of the Assembly at its fifty-eighth session.

The General Committee

The General Committee comprises the President, the 21 Vice-Presidents and the Chairs of the Main Committees. This body should play a much more active role in steering the General Assembly through its deliberations. Given its composition, it is well positioned to maintain an overview of the work in the Main Committees and their link with the agenda of the Assembly. The General Committee should interact more with the Secretariat and could work on the proposed annotated agenda.

- It was widely felt that the General Committee should be activated and should play a much more dynamic role in the course of the Assembly.
- Reporting requirements could also be taken up in the General Committee. Decisions requesting the production of reports by the Secretariat should be assessed in the light of their relative relevance and of the capacity of the Secretariat to produce them.

D. The General Assembly and its Main Committees

The agenda of the General Assembly cannot be seen in isolation from the work of the Main Committees. Obviously, there is a clear link. However, instead of having the Assembly direct the work of the Main Committees, as one would expect, the process seems to work the other way around. The Main Committees carry the agenda of the Assembly, and they have the advantage of garnering the interest of member States (the level of attendance in the Main Committees compares quite favourably with that in the plenary of the Assembly). However, the Main Committees suffer from the repetition syndrome and from a focus on details. It would therefore be desirable to reframe the work of the Main Committees in the light of the suggested changes in the agenda of the Assembly.

- There is no need to concentrate the work of all the Main Committees in the last three months of the year. If the agenda of the Assembly could be grouped into a Millennium Declaration framework, clever sequencing could make effective use of the whole year.
- The sessions of the Main Committees should start with a debate at the Permanent Representative level with the purpose of clearly spelling out the guiding policy lines for the work to be done. This could induce the much-needed deeper interest of Permanent Representatives. It could also put a cap on the too detailed and overzealous approaches adopted by some delegates.
- The Chairs of the Main Committees must play a truly leading role in facilitating and shaping the deliberations of the Committees. In the context of a reactivated General Committee, such a role is key. They could also have a role in stimulating the Secretariat in its task of drafting reports that will actually be used by the delegations.
- In the longer run, possible mergers between committees should be considered. Obvious candidates in this respect are the First and the Fourth Committees. Here, again, a forward-looking approach is needed, based on an assessment of how to manage the agenda effectively.
- While the discussion focused on the Main Committees, it was recognized that there are numerous subsidiary bodies of the Assembly. Certainly not all of these bodies have retained the same urgency and relevance as on the date of their creation. Streamlining, rationalization and modernization of this "forest" should be taken up.

E. The General Assembly — budgeting and management

A more dynamic and forward-looking approach to management and budget issues was also considered necessary for better results. This is an area where the General Assembly has binding authority. Time and again the Assembly misses the opportunity to set out a comprehensive, more strategic approach to these issues. So far the work of the Assembly, and in that respect of the Fifth Committee, has generally shown a tendency towards micromanagement and even narrow- and short-sightedness. Too often discussions on the budget have served political purposes quite outside the management and budget issues of the United Nations that should be the focus of member States in the Fifth Committee.

- The suggestions cited above regarding the involvement of Permanent Representatives in the work of the Assembly and the Main Committees are in particular relevant for the Fifth Committee.

F. The role and meaning of resolutions

The growing number of resolutions reduces the relevance of a resolution as an expression of the will of the international community. Resolutions are often repetitive over the years; somehow the notion has crept in that resolutions do not stand if they are not re-adopted year after year. The approach to resolutions is usually very conservative and defensive. Resolutions hardly ever contribute to a clear insight for the outside world into the intentions of the international community; they are often lengthy, and the process of negotiation and compromise has damaged their readability and usefulness. In terms of action, resolutions in many cases confine themselves to requesting the Secretariat to write a report on the issue concerned. One can only fear what the fate of these reports will be; there seems to be very little interest in the follow-up of resolutions.

- Serious consideration should be given to the role of resolutions. This should include discussions on the format of resolutions, as well as the length and the necessity of repetitive adoption.
- It may be useful to make a distinction between norm-setting or declaratory resolutions on one hand and resolutions that produce binding decisions on financial and management issues on the other.
- It was proposed that resolutions be clustered around major issues as a way of lessening their overall number.
- Resolutions should primarily be focused on new elements.
- Follow-up to resolutions should become the priority. Giving sponsors of resolutions a role in actively monitoring their implementation could be considered. This would create a beginning of accountability that could greatly enhance the credibility of the United Nations.

G. Consensus

Consensual decision-making is the primary hallmark of the General Assembly. At the same time, consensual decision-making brings with it a host of challenges that hamper the ability of the Assembly to achieve positive results quickly. Further, and perhaps more significantly, it can lead to zero-sum bargaining and suboptimal (because of catering to the lowest common denominator) outcomes. Consensus does not necessarily, however, imply unanimity, and member States ought to be comfortable enough to agree to disagree when relevant.

H. The General Assembly and the United Nations system

The revitalization and possible reform of the General Assembly needs to be considered against the backdrop of the Assembly's relationship with other principal Charter bodies, the Secretariat, and the United Nations specialized agencies. The Security Council has in many ways stolen the thunder of the Assembly, and it is incumbent upon the membership as a whole to re-centre (when appropriate) the

Assembly. At the same time, it is important to strengthen the interaction among the intergovernmental bodies.

- It is important to better capitalize on the comparative advantages of the intergovernmental bodies so that they can work in better harmony, as well as comprehensively, towards the achievement of common goals through, for instance, composite committees made up of members of the Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council.

- The relationship between the General Assembly and the Secretariat and United Nations agencies is also important. Too often the relationship is mechanistic, leading to sterile inputs and outputs on behalf of both delegations and the Secretariat. The Secretariat should be encouraged to be more outspoken and to be more daring in its analysis and recommendations.

- It is quite surprising that there are hardly any structural provisions for the member States and the Secretariat to interact. These contacts are ad hoc and depend highly on the willingness of Permanent Representatives to organize such contacts via, for example, lunchtime meetings. Regular debriefings should be considered to remedy this obvious deficiency in the system.

Finally, the relationship between delegations in New York and those in Geneva, Vienna and Nairobi was also touched upon as important in ensuring coherence and proper linkages within the representation of member States.

Other issues

A. Civil society/non-governmental organizations

The role of civil society and non-governmental organizations in providing both valuable knowledge and perspectives on global issues, as well as in furthering the legitimacy of the General Assembly and the United Nations, is still too often underappreciated. Moreover, there are few mechanisms through which the Assembly can systematically engage with or tap relevant members of civil society and non-governmental organizations. While institutionalizing the relationship between the Assembly and civil society/non-governmental organizations risks, as one participant noted, the "carnivalization" of the Assembly, creative mechanisms for engagement ought to be envisaged.

B. Media, capitals and the general public

The lack of public and media interest in the General Assembly is in many ways a side effect of what appears to be a reduction in understanding of and support for the United Nations as a whole around the world, and within the United States of America in particular. This has been heightened in the wake of recent events in and around Iraq. Such lack of support contributes further to the already observable erosion of interest in the Assembly in capitals. The revival of media interest is a necessary component of re-engaging publics and capitals; however, such revival is dependent on heightening the relevance of the Assembly to the public.

C. Revitalize or reform?

Participants raised the question of whether to approach the desired result of strengthening the efficiency and effectiveness of the General Assembly through revitalization — i.e., changes room by room — or whether to attempt reform — i.e., modifying the whole house. It was generally agreed that while there was likely little space in which to address the "fixed constraints" (such as consensual decision-making and the geopolitical context), several options, also more radical solutions, at the policy (macro) and operational (micro) levels could and should be adopted.

New York, 5 June 2003

Enclosure

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